

Depression and Older Adults

Clinical depression is not a normal part of aging

Growing older usually means adjusting to changes in life. Sometimes these changes can mean loss...of loved ones, old routines, or excellent health. It is normal to feel sad or distressed during difficult periods, but if the feelings persist it may be clinical depression. More than two million of the 34 million Americans who are age 65 and older suffer from some form of depression. Clinical depression is a serious medical illness that can and should be treated at any age. Without treatment, the illness can lead to suicide.

Clinical depression is not grief

For many, a depressed mood is a normal reaction to the death of someone they love or the loss of the ability to perform routine activities. People in grief may find it helpful to join a mutual support group to talk with others experiencing similar feelings. However, when this depressed mood persists with no sign of lifting, the person should talk with their doctor or a qualified mental health professional to determine whether it may be clinical depression.

Untreated depression can lead to suicide

Clinical depression is a significant predictor of suicide in elderly Americans. People aged 65 and older make up only 13% of the U.S. population, yet account for 20% of all suicide deaths. Older Caucasian men are particularly vulnerable. In fact, suicide among white males aged 85 and older (65.3 per 100,000) is nearly six times the national U.S. suicide rate (10.8 per 100,000).

Older adults who attempt suicide are more likely than younger adults to succeed. **Should a loved one be expressing thoughts of suicide or desire for death, it is very important that family members and friends take all talk of suicide seriously and consider immediate medical attention.**

Depression may occur with other medical illnesses

Chronic illnesses common in later life – such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease – can actually bring about clinical depression. While it is always difficult to cope with a serious illness, it is not normal to become clinically depressed. Receiving treatment for the depression may even, in some cases, help improve the symptoms of the [other illness](#).

Clinical depression can be successfully treated

Clinical depression is one of the most [treatable](#) of all medical illnesses. In fact, more than 80% of people with depression can be treated successfully with medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of both. Only a physician or qualified mental health professional can decide if someone has clinical depression. As with many illnesses, if treatment is needed, the earlier it begins the more effective it can be. Furthermore, early treatment increases the likelihood of preventing recurrences.

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No one can treat depression on their own

Some older people think they are "too old" to get help for clinical depression. They may be reluctant to talk about their feelings, either out of embarrassment or because they do not want to appear weak. Others mistakenly believe that depression will go away on its own, that they should just "tough it out." Like any other medical illness, clinical depression requires professional treatment. It cannot be treated on one's own.

Talking to friends, family members and clergy can give people the support needed when going through life's difficulties. However, for those with clinical depression, such support is no substitute for the care of a health professional.

Family and friends may need to help their loved one

The nature of clinical depression often makes it difficult for a depressed person to find the motivation or energy to seek treatment. This means that friends and family need to help, not only by expressing their concern but also by guiding the depressed person to seek treatment. In fact, since depression can even cause confusion and withdrawal, it may also be helpful for family or friends to accompany their loved one to the initial physician's evaluation, ask questions, and note instructions.

The role of family and friends can take on added importance should the loved one be expressing thoughts of suicide or desire for death. Again, it is very important that family members and friends take all talk of suicide seriously and consider immediate medical attention.

Life can be enjoyable again! With recognition and treatment, clinical depression can be overcome! Talk with your doctor or a qualified mental health professional if you think you may have symptoms of clinical depression. To determine whether you are experiencing symptoms, take our [confidential depression-screening test](#).

Free online confidential depression screening at www.depressionscreening.org

Contact your EAP (Employee Assistance Program) representative for more information concerning depression.